

Sunny Bank Farm

BY
FLOYD LIVINGSTON

CHAPTER I.

Far away among the New England hills stands a large old-fashioned farm house, around whose hearth stone not many years ago a land of merry, noisy children played—myself the merriest, noisiest of them all. It stood upon an eminence overlooking a broad strip of rolling meadow land, at the extremity of which was the old gray rock, where the sudden red and saffron grew, where the green ivy crept over the crumbling wall, and where, under the shadow of the thorn apple tree, we built our play houses, drinking our tea from the acorn saucers, and painting our dolls' faces with the red juice of the poke berries, which grew there in great abundance.

Just opposite our house, and across the green meadow, was a shady grove, where, in the spring time, the singing birds made their nests, and where, when the breath of winter was on the snow-clothed hills, Lizzie, Carrie and I, and our father, stronger brothers dragged our sleds, dashing swiftly down the steep hill, and away over the ice-covered valley below. Truly, ours was a joyous childhood, and ours a happy home; for never elsewhere fell the summer's golden sunlight so softly, and never was music so sweet in the hazy murmur of the dancing water brook which ran past our door, and down the long green lane, losing itself at last in the dim old woods, which stretched away to the westward, seeming to my childish imagination the boundary line between this world and the deep shadow of those woods I have sat alone for many an hour, watching the white, feathery clouds as they glimmered through the dense foliage, and musing, I scarcely knew of what. Strange fancies filled my brain, and oftentimes, as I sat there in the hazy light of an autumnal afternoon, there came and talked with me myriads of little people, unseen, it is true, but still real to me. There, on a mossy bank, I felt the first longings for fame, though I did not thus designate it then. I only knew that I wanted a name which would live when I was gone—a name of which my mother should be proud. It had been to me a day of peculiar trial. At school everything had gone wrong. I preferred filling my slate with verses, instead of proving on it that four times twenty were eighty, and that eighty, divided by two, equaled four, and my teacher must needs find fault with me, calling me "lazy," and compelling me to sit between two hateful boys, with warty hands, who amused themselves by telling me how big my eyes and feet were. I hardly think I could now submit that mode of punishment, provided I could choose the boys, but I did then, and in the worst of humors, I started for home, where other annoyances awaited me. Sally, the house maid, scolded me for upsetting a pan of milk on her clean pantry shelf, calling me "the careless young one who can't see," and predicting that "I'd one day come to the gallus if I didn't mend my ways."

Juliet, my oldest sister, scolded me for wearing, without her consent, her shell side comb, which, in climbing through a hole in the plastering of the school house, I accidentally broke. Grandmother scolded me for mounting to the top of her high chest of drawers to see what was in them; and to crown all, when toward sunset, I came in from a romp in the barn, with my yellow hair flying all over my face, my dress burst open, my apron split from the top downward, and my sun bonnet hanging down my back, my mother reproved me severely, telling me I was "a sight to behold." My heart came up in my throat, and with the angry sense that "I couldn't help my looks—I didn't make myself," I started through the door, and running down the long lane to the grape vine, my favorite resort, I threw myself upon the ground and burying my face in the tall grass, wept bitterly, wishing I had never been born, or, being born, that the ban of ugliness were not upon me.

Mother doesn't love me, I thought—nobody loves me; and then I wished that I could die, for I had heard that the first death of a family, no matter how unprepossessing they had been in life, were sure to be the best beloved in the memory of the living. To die, then, that I might be loved, was all I asked for, as I lay there weeping alone, and thinking in my childish grief that never before was a girl, nine summers old, so wretched as myself. And then I fell asleep, unconscious that the daylight was fast declining, and that the heavy dew was falling upon my uncovered head.

Meantime, at home many inquiries were being made concerning my whereabouts, and when, at last, night came on and I was still away, my oldest brother was sent in quest of me. I was just dreaming that the trumpet of fame was sounding forth my name, when, alas! I awoke to find it was only brother Charlie, making the woods resound with "Rosa Lee! Where are you? Why don't you answer?" He stumbled over me as I lay, seizing me by the shoulder, he exclaimed, "You are a pretty bird, soaring out of a year's growth. Mother'll scold you well for this."

But he was mistaken, for mother's manner toward me was greatly changed. The torn apron and the chewed bonnet strings were all forgotten, and in the kindest tone she asked, "If I were not cold, and why I went to sleep on the grass." There were tears in my eyes, but I winked hard and forced them back, until Lizzie brought me a piece of eustard pie—my special favorite—which, she said, "she had saved for me, because she knew how much I loved it."

This was too much, and sitting down in Carrie's little chair, I cried aloud, saying in reply to the oft-repeated questions as to what ailed me, that "I didn't know, only I was so glad."

"Hysterical as a witch," was Sally's characteristic comment on my strange behavior; at the same time she suggested that I be put to bed.

That night I was tired and restless, turning uneasily upon my pillow, pushing Lizzie's arm from my neck, because it kept me from breathing, and lying awake until I heard the long creak in grandmother's room strike the hour of twelve. Then I slept, but dreamed there was a heavy pain in my head, which made me moan in my sleep, and that mother, attracted by the sound, came to my side, feeling my pulse, and saying, "What ails you, Rosa?" "There was nothing ailed me," I said; but in the morning when I awoke, the pain was still there, though I would not acknowledge it, for scarcely anything could tempt me to stay away from school; so at the usual hour I started, but the road was long and wearisome, and twice I sat down to rest. Arrived at school, everything seemed strange, and when Maria, the girl who shared my desk, produced a love letter from Tom Jenkins, which she had found on my side of the desk, and in which he made a formal offer of himself, freckles and all, I did not, as Maria, smiling, taking my book, I attempted to study,

take my accustomed place in the old brown school house at the foot of the long hill.

CHAPTER II.

Thanksgiving! How many reminiscences of the olden time does that word call up, when sons and daughters, they who had wandered far and wide, whose locks, once brown and shining with the sunlight of youth, now give tokens that the autumnal frosts of life are falling slowly upon them, return once more to the old hearth stone, and, for a brief space, grow young again amid the festive scenes of Thanksgiving day.

I shall not speak of the feelings as we missed our baby brother, for they who have lost from their bosoms an active, playful child, understand far better than I can describe, the loneliness, the longing for something gone, which becomes almost a part of their being, although at times they may seem to forget. Children's grief is wisdom as lasting as that of mature years; and hence it is not strange if I sometimes forget my sorrow in the joys of anticipation of Thanksgiving day, which was then to me but another name for plum puddings, chicken pie, mince tarts, mince pies, city oysters, a fire in the grate, and what, though not least, the privilege of sitting at the first table, and using grandma's six tiny silver spoons, with the initials of her maiden name marked upon them.

On such occasions my thoughts invariably took a leap backward, and looking at grandma's wrinkled face and white, shining hair, I would wonder if she ever were young like me; and if, being young, she swung on gates or climbed trees, and walked the great beams, as I did. Then, with another bound, my thoughts would penetrate the future when I, a dignified grandmother, should recline in my arm chair, stately and stiff, in my heavy satin and silver gown, while my oldest son, a man just my father's size, should render me all the homage and respect due to one of my age. By myself, too, I had several times tried on grandma's clothes, spectacles, cap and all; and then, seated in her chair, with the big Bible in my lap, I had expounded Scripture to the imaginary children around me, frequently reminding Rosa for her inattention, asking her what "she thought would become of her if she didn't stop wriggling so in her chair, and learn 'the chief end of man.'"

The Thanksgiving succeeding Jamie's death and my own recovery from sickness great preparations were made, it being confidently expected that my father's brother, who lived in Boston, would be with us, together with his wife, a lady whose reputation for sociability and staidity of manners was, with us, rather below par. She was my uncle's second wife, and rumor said that neither himself nor his home was as comfortable as they once had been. From the same reliable source, too, we learned that she breakfasted in her own room at ten, dined at three, made or received calls until six, went to parties, soirees, or the theater in the evening, and seldom got to bed until two o'clock in the morning; a mode of living which was pronounced little better than bestiality by grandma.

Mother, who was more discreet, very wisely advised her not to interfere with the arrangements of her daughter-in-law. "It would do no good," she said, "and might possibly make matters worse." Unlike most old people, grandma was not very much of her own way, and to mother's suggestion she replied, that "Mebby she shouldn't say anything; 'twould depend on how many airs Charlotte put on."

To me the expected visit was a sore trial; for, notwithstanding my cheeks and neck were rounder and fuller than they had ever been, my head, with its young crop of short, stiff hair, was a terrible annoyance, and more than once I had cried as I saw in fancy the derisive smile with which my dreaded aunt Charlotte was sure to greet me. At last sister Anna, who possessed a great deal of taste in such matters, and who ought to have been a milliner, contrived for the "peaked chicken," as she called me, a black lace cap, which fitted me so well, and was so vastly becoming, that I lost all my fears, and, child-like, began to count the days which must elapse before I could wear it.

Meantime, in the kitchen there was a loud rattling of dishes, a beating of eggs, and calling for wood, with which to heat the great brick oven, grandma having pronounced the stove unfit for baking a Thanksgiving dinner. From the cornfield behind the barn a golden pumpkin, four times larger than my head and about the same color, was gathered, and after being brought to the house, was pared, cut open, scraped and sliced into a little tin kettle with a copper bottom, where for hours it stewed and sputtered, filling the atmosphere with a faint, sickly odor, which I think was the main cause of the severe headache I took to bed with me. Mother, on the contrary, differed from me, she associated it in some way with the rapid disappearance of the raisins, cinnamon, sugar and so forth, which, in sundry brown papers, lay open upon the table.

The next morning, just as the first gray streaks of daylight were appearing in the east, I awoke, finding, to my great joy, that my headache was gone. Rising upon my elbow and leaning far out of bed, I pushed aside the striped curtain which shaded the window, and looking out upon the ground below, saw, to my utter dismay, that it was covered with snow. To me there is nothing pleasant in a snow storm, a snow bank or a snow cloud; and when a child, I used to think that with the fall of the first flake there came over my spirits a chill, which was not removed until the spring time, when, with its cause, it melted away; and even now, when, with my rubber boots, I dare brave any drift not more than five feet four inches high, I cannot say that I have any particular love for snow; and as from my window I watch the descent of the feathery flakes, I always feel an irresistible desire to make at them my dislike. On the morning of which I have spoken, I vented my displeasure in the usual way, and then I fell into a deep sleep, from which I was at last awakened by the loud shouts of my brothers, who, in the meadow across the road, were pelting each other with balls, occasionally rolling over in the pure, white snow, which they hailed as an old and well-loved friend.

(To be continued.)

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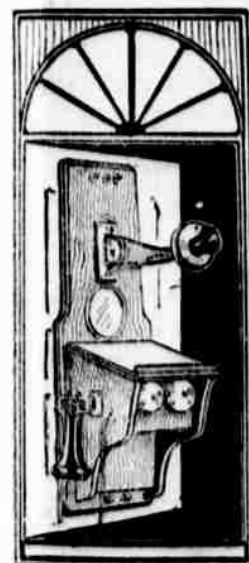
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